Blessed Are The Poor

Meister Eckhart

Sermon, “Blessed are the Poor”

(Beati Pauperes Spiritu, Quoniam Ipsorum est Regnum Caelorum, Matt. 5:3)

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Blessedness opened its mouth of wisdom and spoke: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

All angels and all saints and all that were ever born must be silent when the wisdom of the Father speaks, for all the wisdom of the angels and of all creatures is pure foolishness before the groundless wisdom of God. And this wisdom has said that the poor are blessed.

Now there are two kinds of poverty: an external poverty, which is good and is to be much praised in a man who willingly accomplishes it through the love of our Lord, Jesus Christ, because he was himself poor on

earth. Of this poverty I do not want to speak any further. Yet, there is still another kind of poverty, an inner poverty by which our Lord's word is to be understood when he says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Now I beseech you to be just so poor, so as to understand this speech. For I say to you by the eternal truth: So long as you do not equal this truth of which we now want to speak, you cannot understand me.

Various people have asked me what poverty is in itself and what a poor man is. That is what we want to answer.

Bishop Albrecht says that a poor man is he who finds no satisfaction in any of the things that God ever created—and that is well said. But we say it better still and take poverty in a yet higher understanding: a poor man is he who wills nothing, knows nothing and has nothing. Of these three points we are going to speak, and I beseech you for the love of God that you understand this truth if you can. But should you not understand it, do not worry yourselves because of it, for the truth I want to speak of is of such a kind that only a few good people will understand it.

First we say that he is a poor man who wills nothing. What this means many people do not

correctly understand. It is those people who in penitential exercise and external practice, of which they make a great deal, hold fast to their selfish I. The Lord have pity upon such people who know so little of the divine truth. Such people are called holy on account of their external appearance, but internally they are asses, for they do not grasp the actual meaning of divine truth. Indeed, these individuals, too, say that he is a poor man who wills nothing. However, they fancy this to mean that one should never fulfill one's own will in any way, but rather strive to fulfill the ever beloved will of God. These people are right in their way, for they mean well and for that let us commend them. May God in his mercy grant them entry into heaven. But in all divine truth I say that these people are not poor people nor do they resemble poor people. They are highly considered only in the eyes of those who know no better. I, however, say that they are asses, understanding nothing of divine truth. Because of their good intention may they receive the kingdom of heaven. But of that poverty of which we now want to speak, they know nothing.

If someone asks me now what a poor man is who wills nothing, I answer and say: So long as a man has this particular wish to fulfil the ever beloved will of God—if that is still a matter of

his will, then this man does not yet possess the poverty of which we want to speak. Indeed, this man then still has a will with which he wants to satisfy God’s will, and that is not the right poverty. For a human being to possess true poverty he must be bereft of his created will as he was when he was not yet. Thus I say to you in the name of divine truth: as long as you have the will to fulfil God’s will, and as long as you have the desire for eternity and God, you are not poor; for he alone is a poor man who wills nothing and desires nothing.

When I still stood in my first cause, I had no God, I was cause of myself. There I willed nothing and desired nothing, for I was a pure being and a knower of myself in full enjoyment of the truth. There I willed myself and willed nothing else. What I willed, I was, and what I was, that I willed.

There I stood, clear of God and of all things. But when by free will I went out and received my created being, then I had a God. Indeed, before there were creatures, God was not yet God, but he was what he was. But when creatures came to be and received their created being, then God was no longer God in himself, rather he was God in the creatures. Now we say that God, so far as he is God, is not a perfect goal for creatures. Indeed, even the lowliest creature

possesses that high a rank within God. And were it that a fly possessed a reason and could intelligently seek the eternal abyss of divine being out of which it has come, then we would say that God, with all he is as God, would still be incapable of fulfilling and satisfying this fly. Therefore we beg God to rid us of God so that we may grasp and eternally enjoy the truth where the highest angel and the fly and the mind are equal. There I stood and willed what I was, and was what I willed. So then we say: If man is to be poor in will, he must will and desire as little as he willed and desired when he was not yet. And in this way a man is poor who wills nothing.

Furthermore, a poor man is one who knows nothing. We have said on occasion that man's life should be such that he lives neither for himself, nor for the truth, nor for God. This time, however, we say it differently. We want to go further and say: whoever is to be so poor (as I am describing it) must live so that he not even know himself to live, neither for himself, nor for truth, nor for God. He must be bereft of all knowledge to the point of neither knowing nor recognizing nor perceiving that God lives in him; even more: he should be devoid of all knowledge that lives in him. For, when man still stood in God's eternal being, nothing else lived in him (than that being). All that was alive, there, was he (that

man) himself. Hence we say that man should be so devoid of his own knowledge as he was when he was not yet. He should let God accomplish whatever God wills, and man should stand void.

All that ever came out of God is set to unmixed activity. The activity proper to man, now, is to love and to know. It is a point of controversy, though, in which of these happiness consists primarily. Some masters have said that it lies in knowing, some say it lies in loving, still others say that it lies in knowing and in loving; these are closer to the mark. We say, however, that it lies neither in knowing nor in loving. Rather, there is a oneness in the mind whence flow knowing and loving. It itself does not know and love, as do the forces of the mind. Whoever comes to know this (oneness) knows what happiness consists in. This (oneness) has neither before nor after, and it is in want of nothing additional, for it can neither gain nor lose. That is also why it is deprived of understanding that God is acting within it. Even more: it is itself that identical self which is its own fruition, quite as God. Thus we say that man shall keep himself rid and void so that he neither understand nor know that God works in him. Only so can man possess poverty. The masters say that God is a being, an intelligent being, and that he knows all things. We say, however: God is neither being nor

intelligent nor does he know this or that. Thus God is free of all things, and therefore he is all things. Whoever is to be poor in spirit, then, must be poor of all his own understanding so that he understand nothing either of God or of creatures or of himself. That is why it is necessary for man to desire that he become unable to understand or know anything at all of the works of God. That is the way to be poor of one's own understanding.

Thirdly, he is a poor man who has nothing. Many people have said that this is perfection that man possess none of the material things of the earth. And, indeed, that is certainly true in one sense: when one holds to it with resolve. But this is not the sense that I mean.

I have said before that he is poor who does not even will to fulfil God's will, that is, who lives in such a way that he is devoid both of his own will and of God's will, quite as he was when he was not yet. Of this poverty we say that it is the highest poverty. Secondly, we have said he is a poor man who himself understands nothing of God's activity in him. Whoever stands as devoid of understanding and knowing as God stands void of all things, then that is the purest poverty. Thirdly, the poverty of which we are now going to speak is the strictest: that man have nothing

Now pay close and serious attention. I have often said, and great masters say so too: Man

must be so clear of all things and all works, be they inward or outward, that he can become a proper abode for God, wherein God may operate. But this time we say it differently. If man comes to actually keep himself free of all creatures, of God and of himself, but if it is still the case that God can find in him a site for acting, then we say: So long as that is so, that man is not poor in the strictest poverty. For in his doings God does not strive for a site that man leave him to work in. Rather, only that is poverty of spirit when one keeps oneself so clear of God and of all one's works that if God wants to act in the mind, he (God) is himself the place wherein he wants to act—and this he likes to do. For if God finds man so poor, God operates his own work and man suffers God in him, and God is himself the site of his operation, since God is an agent who acts within himself. Henceforth, in this poverty, man recovers the eternal being that he was, now is and will eternally remain.

There is a saying of Saint Paul which reads: "But by the grace of God I am what I am" (I Cor. 15:10). My own saying, on the contrary, seems to hold itself above grace and above being and above knowing and above willing and above desiring—how then can Saint Paul's word be true? To this one must answer that Saint Paul's words are true. God's grace was necessarily in

him: for the grace of God effected in him the completion of accidental into essential being. When grace finished and had completed its work, Paul remained what he was (that is, what he had been from eternity).

Thus we say that man must be so poor that he is not and has no place wherein God could act. Where man still preserves some place in himself, he preserves distinction. This is why I pray God to rid me of God, for my essential being is above God insofar as we comprehend God as the principle of creatures. Indeed, in God's own being, where God is raised above all being and all distinctions, I was myself, I willed myself, and I knew myself to create this man (that I am). Therefore, I am cause of myself according to my being which is eternal, but not according to my becoming which is temporal. Therefore also I am unborn, and according to my unborn being I can never die. According to my unborn being I have always been, I am now, and shall eternally remain. What I am by my (temporal) birth is to die and be annihilated, for it is mortal; therefore with time it must pass away. In my (eternal) birth all things were born, and I was cause of myself as well as of all things. If I had willed it, neither I nor any things would be. And if I myself were not, God would not be either: that God is God, of this I am a cause. If I were not, God would not be

God. There is, however, no need to understand this.

A great master says that his breakthrough is nobler than his emanation, and this is true. When I emanated from God, all things spoke: God is; but this cannot make me happy, for it makes me understand that I am a creature. In the breakthrough, on the other hand, where I stand devoid of my own will and of the will of God and of all his works and of God himself, there I am above all created kind and am neither God nor creature. Rather, I am what I was and what I shall remain now and forever. Then I receive an impulse which shall bring me above all the angels. In this impulse I receive wealth so vast that God cannot be enough for me in all that makes him God, and with all this divine works. For in this breakthrough it is bestowed upon me that I and God are one. There I am what I was, and I neither diminish nor grow, for there I am an immovable cause that moves all things. Now God no longer finds a place in man, for man gains with this poverty what he has been eternally and evermore will remain. Now God is one with the spirit, and that is the strictest poverty one can find.

Those who cannot understand this speech should not trouble their hearts about it. For, as long as man does not equal this truth, he will not

understand this speech. For this is unhidden truth that has come immediately from the heart of God.

That we may so live as to experience it eternally, so help us God. Amen.